

Pabre Festival of the Reme People of Gombe State, Nigeria: A Judeo-African Perspective

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Abstract

*West Africa could be described as that part of Africa extending from Cape Verde **too** in the west to the eastern boundaries of the present Nigeria, Niger Republic and Cameroun. During the Pre-colonial period there was a movement of people in that part of Africa known as the Sudan. The movement involved many tribes that included the various people of the present West Africa. Amongst those tribes were the Reme people of Balanga Local Government Area of Gombe State, Nigeria. This paper is therefore concerned with the origin, movement, settlement and the interaction of the Reme people with other communities before and after the pre-colonial period; with the aid of describing among other issues the religious and socio-cultural perception of the people. The work discusses origin of the people, their location, ethnicity, Pabre Festival and its social relevance, their interaction with other people and the effect of social change on the society. Library materials, electronic sources and oral interview reports were used as methods of data collection concerning the Reme people. The approach adopted is the expository approach which describes the sources collected. Literature reviewed and oral interview reports collected revealed that the people originated from Yemen in the Middle East. It also revealed that the source of Pabre festival is from the long trek of the people and their sufferings. Reme society is poorly exposed to western education; lacks social amenities like roads and clinics. The researcher recommends that the Reme society needs to take conscious measures in encouraging western education in the area, providing infrastructure and social amenities like water, clinics. The Pabre festival could be modernized to be one of the site seeing areas in Gombe State to attract development and revenue.*

Key words: Migration, Pabre, Reme, Festival, Relevance, Interaction

Introduction

Gombe state is a multi-ethnic society in Nigeria. The state's major ethnic groups include Awak, Bolewa, Cham, Dadiya, Kamo, Kushi, Lunguda, Pero, Tangale, Tera Tula, and Waja (among who the Reme people are part of). Others are Fulani, Hausa, Igbo, Jukun, Kanuri, Tiv and Yoruba. The major ethnic groups mostly settled in Tangale-Waja, Gombe south (Brunk, et'al) and majority of these are Christians by religious affiliation

According to Brunk Kansteen, Frankfurt and Main (1994), the major ethnic groups could be classified into two based on their linguistic origin: The Kushi, Pero and Tangale belong to the Chadi language family and the rest belong to the Niger-Congo language family. The ethnic groups also claim the same geographical origin

(Yemen).The authors explain that the possibility of their having pre-existed together before the turbulence at Ngazargamu in Kanem-Bornu Empire could be traced in their cultural perception and similarity (Ogini F.G 66, 67). For example they share in farming and harvest festivities which occur in the beginning and end of the season. Also the possibility of their having been displaced from their original block movement could be seen from their sporadic settlements which present similar slangs in language.

The Settlement of the Reme People

Reme is part of Waja Chiefdom in Balanga Local Government and is located on the South of Talasse, the Head-Quarters of Balanga Local Government Area. Reme is bounded on East by Dalawaja, on the South by Degri, on the West by Balanga Dam and Tula; on the north by Gelengu and Talasse. Reme is in a valley and could be easily identified by the only hill on her north-east.

Ethnicity

The Reme people are also Waja by tribe (Waja standing for tribe, language and place). They claim to have been in the area before the coming of the Fulani jihadists. The Reme people came in a group of five clans of- Nadiya, Guka, Kokala, Dongala and Gukurumba; each with her own claims but in unity. The specific time and date of their settlement may not be possible just like that of their neighbouring immigrants. But according to Brunk and Frankfurt, it is possible to find more information of the settlement in Edward Vogel's reports (April, 1855); for he travelled through the area when the Reme people were already settled. The Reme people compared to the other tribes have the most perfect artistic marks similar to those of Awak, Kamo and Tera groups. They share some terminologies with the Tangale. They also share in early discovery and usage of cloth as dressing material with the Tera and Fulani than the other groups they came together With these in mind, the Waja from whom the Reme are part of, could be said to have seniored the rest of the ethnic groups of Gombe state in terms of socialization because they, like the Tera and Fulani, were the first to produce cloth and clothes through manual production of thread.

Pabre Festival

The default meaning of Pabre is *'implicate you'* (meaning being involved in something or action as a group); for the people came through a thick forest which made all of them to develop rashes on their bodies as they came out of it. After settling down, a man from the Nadiya clan suggested that they should go back and burn the bush which he said had certain evil spirits which caused their bodies to develop rashes, so that they would appease them; and that was the origin of the festival Pabre. The proponent (the Nadiya man) was therefore made the first hereditary priest of the shrine which is located at the foot of the Reme hill; hence the development of the festival called Pabre. Initially, its celebration lasted for a period of seven days in the months of February/March alternatively, with strict adherence and observance of its ritualistic celebration particularly the costume colour and dressing. Its celebration comprised of bush burning, dances and songs. The costume was made of white dresses for both men and women and no one was allowed to wear any shoes

or other coloured dress than the white colour. The white colour symbolized holiness and peace. The clan therefore claimed to be responsible for child birth, while the other clans of were made responsible for certain powers.

Social Relevance of Pabre Festival

Pabre is an annual festival celebrated in the month of February of every year. In the African context and before the modern period, leadership of the society of any type, there was usually the religious charisma as a factor for selection of an authoritative leader to the throne. It is in this notion that Pabre played a role in the social organization of the Reme society. The clans that made up the Reme society include- Dongola, Guka, Gukurumba, Kokola and Nadiya. Their first settlement was at *Kwundi near* the Reme hill; the seat of the chief priest and headquarters of the society. Also, this makes the Nadiya clan automatically the priestly clan. To keep the headquarters safe, the society became well organized by settling the Dongola on the North- West; the Gukurumba on the East; the Kokala on the South-East and the Guka on the South-West. It brought order and peace in the society and made a historic event that was passed on to the younger generation.

Pabre has therefore become an established festival celebrated annually. During the celebration, the men hunted animals and also carry sticks from the burnt forest and no one is allowed to wear shoes, cap or any coloured material that is not white. In terms of productivity, the priestly clan claims the gift of child birth. Some sieved sand is carried by the young women during celebrations and pour it in the shrine where the chief priest stayed for the souls of unborn babies *toile* on. Should there be infertility in marriage; the couple must go to the shrine with gifts for rituals before they can get an issue. Apart from the priestly clan, the Dongola claim the gift of animal production; Gukurumba the gift of beans production; kokala the gift of grains and Guka the ruling clan.

Pabre-Festival celebration period was a period of gathering home sons including those in the Diaspora. The significance of the festival included its cultural identification in and around Gombe State. It preserved a cultural setting for the younger generation to maintain as a people. The made the origin of the Reme people realistic that showed they have a background as people. The people of Reme have been known in Europe by their archival storage which the colonial masters kept; for the society had been there before the colonization of Nigeria by Britain.

Interaction with other people

Reme Society has never been an island since her settlement. Informants confirmed that before the coming of the Fulani and the white men to the area, the people interacted in local trading with their neighbours. They travelled far and wide after people came to live peacefully with each other.

i) The Fulani Jihad.

By the beginn9ng of the 1900 a Muslim population grew in the western Sudan with scholars including Usman Danfodio who became the most pronounced leader of fundamental Islamic puritans of the Sudan, This group grew and spread all over the Sudan with 14 chiefs known as Flag Bearers (these were later declared as

Emirs with their area of Jurisdiction. Their main aim was to convert and provide pure Islamic religion (Webster, et'al 3-12). Bubayero who was the first Emir of Gombe continued to wage the religious war amongst the various societies including Reme in the area of Balanga Local Government. According to informants, the Jihadists were not able to subdue the Reme people. The Reme people used fire to prevent the Jihadists' horses from reaching them. According to the informants, the horses of the Jihadists could not endure the heat from the fire built with chaff around the town refuge. The jihadists sent their armed fighters several times but could not succeed in subduing the Reme society. The only period the Fulani came in contact with the Reme people was when the white men (Lord Lugard) employed their services of the flag bearers into the governance of the colonized areas. Two of Buba Yero's sons ruled the Waja people (the flag bearer) Two of his sons were made the

ii) The Colonial Masters

According to informants the Fulani ruled became possible during the take-over of the area by the "white man". At this period the Fulani actually tortured them. They beat them, took their corn forcefully to feed their horses and made them to carry any touring white man in the area to the next neighbouring area. It was at this period too that Islam penetrated the Reme society. Islam actually has great influence on the Reme society than Christianity. Islam was accepted earlier in the society than Christianity because the first to rule the whole Waja district were the Fulani; a period when Lord Lugar made use of the emirs as personnel that could help him. The son of the flag bearer to Gombe (Kweiranga) ruled Waja land before a Waja man became a chief there (Jauro, Buba Degri). Reme got the first primary school in the late 1970s until in the 1990 that two more primary schools were added at Jungge and Lewa communities. The successful penetration of Islam in Reme as a religion was due to the leadership of Kweiranga; hence more people in Reme are Malams who can read the Qur'an in Arabic.

iii) The Christian Missions:

The Christian Missions did not have much influence in the area. The Christian mission that came to Waja land was the Sudan Interior Mission (S.I.M.). They settled in a neighbouring community (Gelengu) and then got converts from the other communities including Reme. Reme had maintained only one Church until 1990 that another local Church had been added.

With these external forces, the Pabre-Festival has become less influential until today because a large number of the youths have embraced Islam while few others turned to Christianity leaving only the older people with the cultural practices.

i) The Yemen Origin

The claim of the Reme people to have originated from Yemen points to the Ancient near East, the cradle of life (Gen 2:7ff). The whole block of the major groups that was dispersed by the Ngazargamu turbulence and has moved to Gombe south claim to have originated from Yemen in the Middle East (Ancient near East).

ii) Similitude in Reme-Jewish Cultural Perception

The Pabre cultural celebration of the Reme Society has certain issues to share with that of the Jewish festival of Booths (Shelter) in Numbers 29:12ff. The festival in

the two worlds developed from their experiences in the desert or bush tracing; the main purpose of the festivals is to recall their harsh experiences and also give thanks to their god in celebration; they both had has weather and rashes respectively; all participated in the celebration regardless of age and sex; the methods of celebration carried along laws to be observed and patterns of behaviour; etc. The similitude in the two worlds of Reme and Israel also points to the dispersal at Babel after the flood that occurred during the time of Noah (Gen 11:1-6). The dispersal must have affected all human races including the African society from which comes Reme Society. This also points to the oneness of people.

iii) Western Education

Backwardness of the Reme society in Western education is due to the precedence of Islam in the area; the poor infrastructural means which could not allow easy development of health facilities and business in the area. Added to these facts, the Islamic religion did not embrace western education easily in Nigeria even after independence as can be seen in some parts of Northern Nigeria including Reme Society; an interest which seems to begin now with vigor.

Recommendations

1. There is need to encourage western education in the area. The sons of the area who are opportune to join politics can levy with the Local and the State governments for improvement of educational facilities. The sons and daughters who have succeeded in life, in one way or the other can come together to decide what to do in order to help their younger brothers and sisters get educated variously.
2. The Chieftdom and Balanga Local Government need to encourage the Pabre Festival which is done annually by improving the site with more art works and certain attractive events that can attract both national and international adventurers; and with these the government can provide roads and certain amenities, since it will earn revenue for the government.
3. The sons and daughters of the area who have been opportune to work with None Governmental Organizations can introduce the area with her rich research problems ranging from poor education, poor health care, poor agricultural education and poor girl child education. With regards to the cultural similarity with Israel there is need for more research work by scholar who can establish more factors responsible for the trend of the similitude.

Conclusion:

The challenge is for the sons and daughters of Reme and their well wishers to look into the possibility of improving the society. The politicians of the land should not only come to campaign for people to vote them in, but should be selfless and sacrifice their widows mite for their mother land. As far as the researcher is concerned, the work has achieved its objectives by displaying all that is needed concerning Pabre Festival and the Reme Society of Gombe State, Nigeria.

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